

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWS ARTICLES ON MEXICAN MIGRATION

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the changes in the language used to describe migrants in News articles regarding Mexican migration into the United States. This report analyzes the frequency of words used to describe migrants in 98 online articles from 9 news outlets of varying political leanings from the year 2008-2019. Mexican migration into the United States as well as the tensions surrounding it has been on the rise. Changing sentiments regarding migration are often reflected in the kinds of words used to describe the people migrating across the southern Mexican border. How and where this discourse is happening is important because it matters not just that events are reported accurately, but in a nonbiased manor. While a certain bias even when unintentional is almost unavoidable. This means that the words used to describe certain people and events can give insight into the sentiments of the author as well as potentially the opinions of the average reader. Trends of how news is reported, whether with an active or passive tone, with sympathetic or negative descriptors, and with what key words can indicate shifts in public opinion as well as their correlation to world events that may not be otherwise apparent.

Key words: migrant, immigrant, Mexico, United States, caravan, illegal, alien, asylum, Fox News, Breitbart, The Blaze, PBS, BBC, NPR, The New York Times, The Washington Post, MSNBC

Introduction and Importance

What I wanted to discover was the potential of the words used to describe migrants revealing a connection to the political leaning of the news outlet covering the story. Whether a person attempting to move into the united states is described as an illegal alien or an asylum seeker says a lot about the kinds of opinions on Mexican migrants the writer is trying to convey to the reader. As confirmation bias drives us to connect more strongly with information that affirms our worldview, the kinds of words news outlets choose can also reveal a lot about the kinds of people such an article might attract. (Westerwick, 2017) This can help illuminate changing opinions on migration as well. For example, according to research done by the BBC, "... Conservatives favor the term "Illegal immigrants" which hardliners often truncate to "illegals"; (while) immigrant advocates prefer "undocumented immigrants"..." (Ruz, 2015) Revealing the direction of word use is impactful in telling us how migration is viewed by certain demographics and if that opinion is shifting.

Disclaimer

While I have received the CITI Research Methods and Compliance Training certificate, because my thesis consists of publicly available data that at no time obtained identifiable information from or interacted with individuals, it does not need review by the Institutional Review Board.

“Migrant” used in the context of this thesis refers specifically to non-US citizens who have at any point crossed, are crossing, or are planning to cross north from the US/Mexican border into the United States with or without proper documentation or plan to stay beyond the legal limits of their documentation for any reason even if they plan to obtain proper documentation at a future date.

Methodology

I used archived digital news sources to study longitudinally how rhetoric regarding Mexican Migration has changed. I have achieved this by specifically looking at the rates that key words appear on the relevant articles. Using a variety of media outlets to cover the political spectrum, a depiction of how immigration has changed over time emerges. The political leaning of the news outlet was also tracked to see if this has any affect on the kinds of words used to discuss the people taking part in migration. The subject of the research is news outlets defined by a 2014 Pew Research Center poll on the average ideological placement of viewers from varying news sources. Based on this data, sources were chosen that both consistently and accurately represent the ideology of Liberals, Conservatives and Mixed Viewers based on polls of the viewers themselves. These sources also had to be reported as trustworthy by each political viewer base and reported as familiar by at least 40% of respondents to ensure that they are both popular and mainstream. This was done to avoid choosing any radical news outlet that was unrepresentative of that particular viewer base’s general sentiments.

The conservative news outlets that met these criteria were:

- Fox News
- Breitbart

- The Blaze.

Capturing trusted sources in the conservative sphere proved to be more difficult because of a general higher level of distrust in media sources among Conservatives.

The highest trusted, popular and consistently liberal sources I will be using are:

- PBS
- BBC
- NPR

The highest trusted consistently Mixed Viewer sources I will be using are:

- The New York Times
- The Washington Post
- MSNBC.

For the sources that are most trusted by Mixed Viewers, sources were chosen that were the most trusted by Conservative and Liberal viewers sides and by those who self reported as an undecided voter.

The temporal range of the study spanned from January 2008 to June 2019. A custom search was conducted to find only articles by a particular news outlet that appeared under the term “Mexican Migration” for January 1st to December 31st. An analysis was performed on the first *relevant* article that appeared for each year. It was necessary to occasionally disregard the first or second result if it did not actually pertain to specifically Mexican migration, despite the search term. The analysis involved recording the frequency of certain words, the headline, total word count, the general tone used to discuss migrants as well as any other relevant information. This search and analysis was repeated for every year

and then repeated for every news outlet. It is also important to note that care was taken to ensure not to double count words that appear in multiple categories. For example, the term “Illegal Aliens” counts towards “Illegal” and “Alien.” However, “Migrant” does not count towards the total use of the word “Immigrant.”

Words studied:

- Caravan
- Migrant
- Asylum
- Illegal
- Immigrant
- Refugee
- Alien.

Limitations of the Data and Analysis

The news outlets studied are only those most widely consumed in the United States and do not represent the greater trend of discussion of migration worldwide. Also, it is important to note that the connotation of words shift over time. This study was conducted in 2019 based on what words are deemed politically correct and incorrect at the current time. While the period of time studied is 11 years from 2008-2019, undoubtedly the undertones of these words has shifted somewhat over the years. However, for this study, the words are treated as if their connotation is constant despite the fluid nature of language. What is generally seen as sympathetic today like ‘asylum,’ might be used as a derogatory term in future years. The impact of the subjective use of the terms are only applicable to the current years studied as they are a product of the time period they are used in.

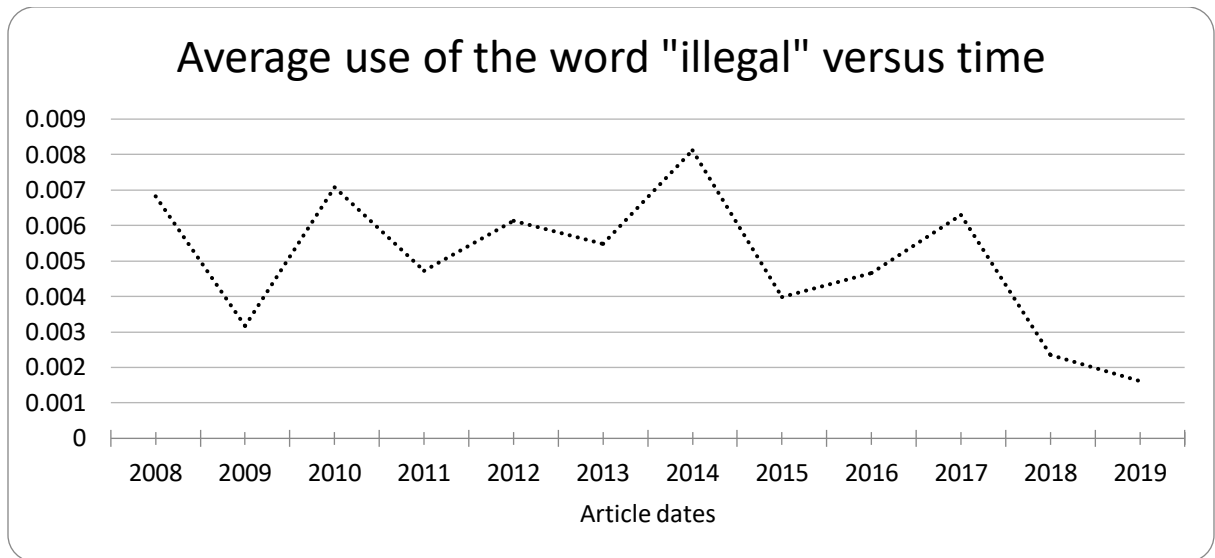
According to the Pew Research Center's analysis of political Polarization, 47% of Consistent Conservatives chose Fox News as their **one main** news source. The data collected is not weighted to reflect the proportion of viewers that is represented by that news source. Every article is given the same weight as every other article, even if it makes up smaller or larger viewer base. This was done because it was unable to track the exact viewership of every single article and it was unrealistic to be able to accurately analyze the impact of every article within a community.

Background on Word Use

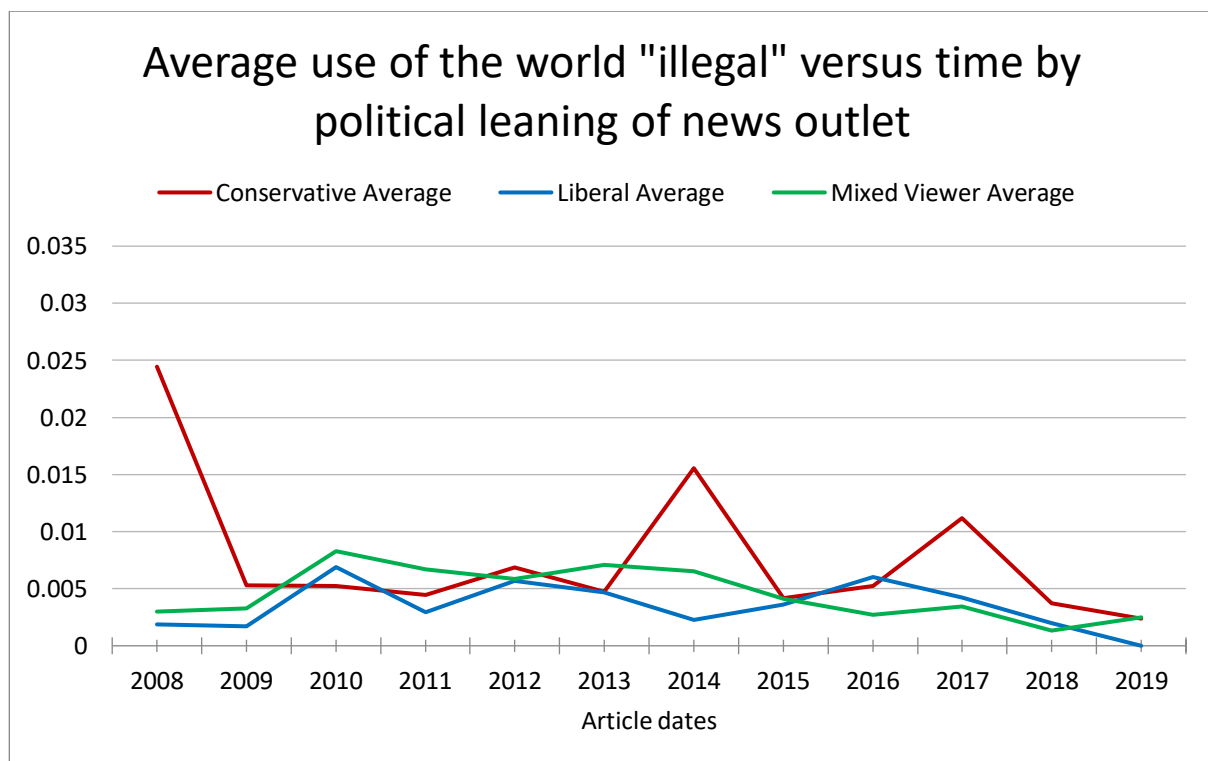
The word 'Migrant' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "one who moves, either temporarily or permanently, from one place, area, or country of residence to another." (OED) This is generally regarded as a neutral term by most political sources. However, some news outlets such as Al-Jazeera criticize its use, claiming that it has evolved from its dictionary use to one that dehumanizes and distances. (Ruz) Despite this, the word Migrant was chosen as the preferred search term due to its widespread use and relatively universal understanding. According to the same BBC news article, the term 'economic migrant' is a more neutral term. However, as not a single article studied used this term, it was omitted. It is also important to note that while the term 'alien' has fallen out of popular discourse since world war two, it is still the official terminology used by the US government for any person who is not a citizen or a national. Additionally, while the term Exile can also be used to apply to migrants, it has since fallen out of favor since the end of the cold war and was not used by any of the articles studied.

Data

The Use of Specific Words:

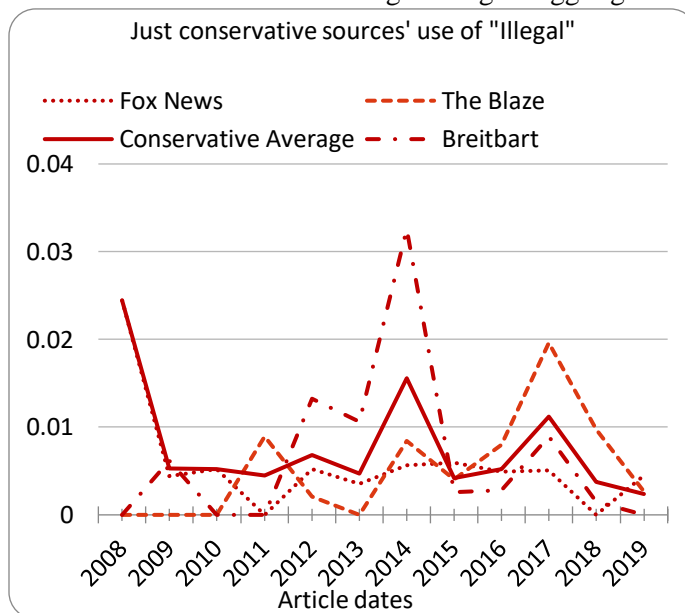


The rate of the use of the word *Illegal* remains moderately consistent between 2008 and 2017. However, in 2018 it drops to its lowest use yet and continues to decline the following year.

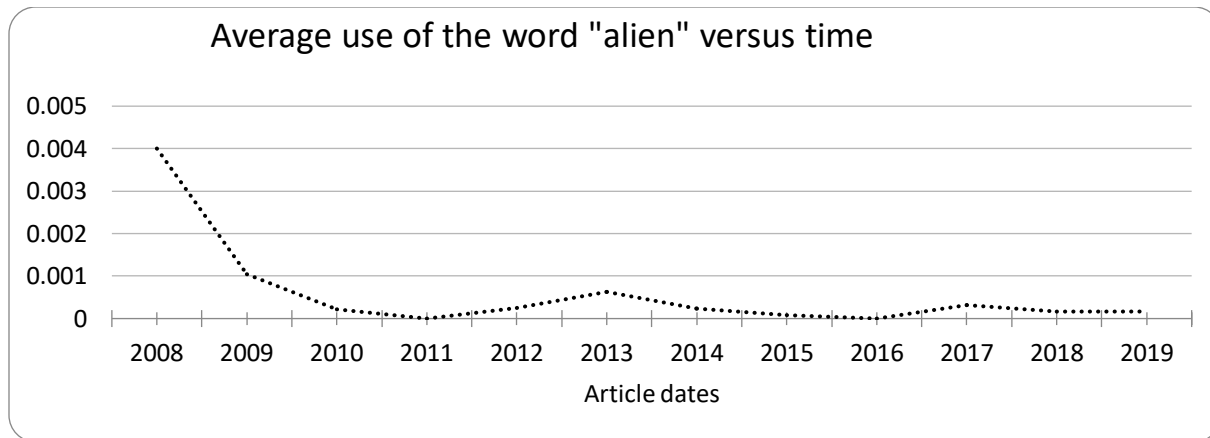


Use of the word Illegal by all sources remains relatively consistent, but it sees a sharp spike in use by conservatives in 2008, 2014 and 2017. Use by Mixed and liberal sources is almost identical; showing limited frequency in 2008-2009, an increased in 2010-2016 and then a decrease of use especially by conservative sources. This could signal that the word is falling out of style in popular media. This can also indicate that immigrants are being less associated with the idea of illegal activities. This is important because even if the act of migration itself is not illegal. It's changing association to illegal activities means that there is a cultural shift in the way news organizations are writing about immigrants. This could signal a wider societal shift away from migration being something illegal or negative.

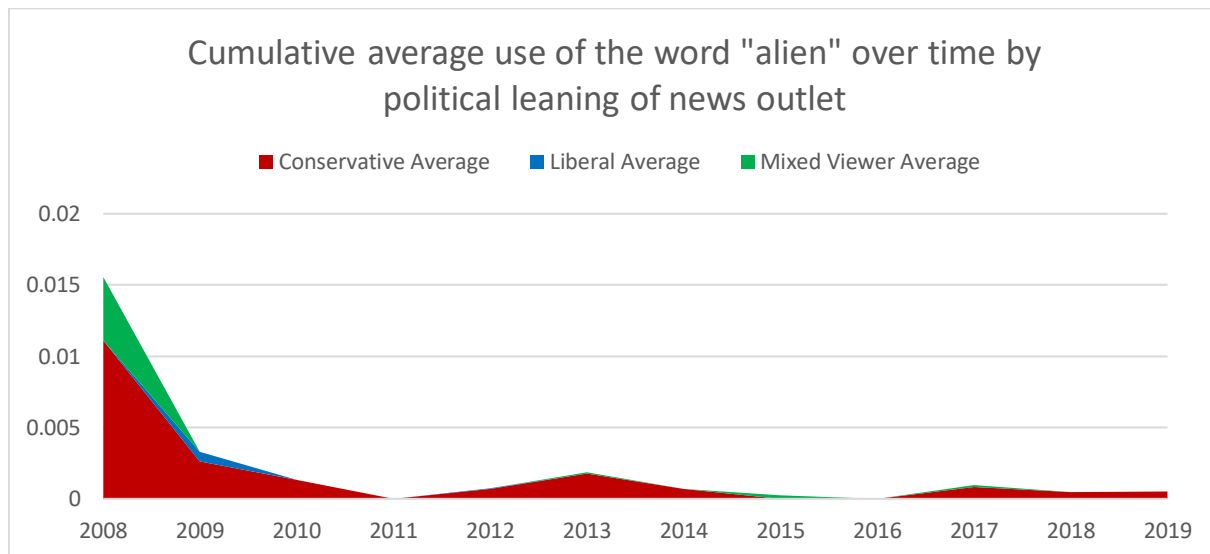
The spikes of use by conservatives in 2014, 2017 and most notably in 2008 are due almost entirely to sharp increase in just one source's articles for that year. This shows an unpredictable variability in conservative's use of certain language like the term "illegal immigrant." There is also a consistent baseline of use by all sources as many articles on Mexican migration also discuss certain illegal behaviors like human trafficking or drug smuggling.



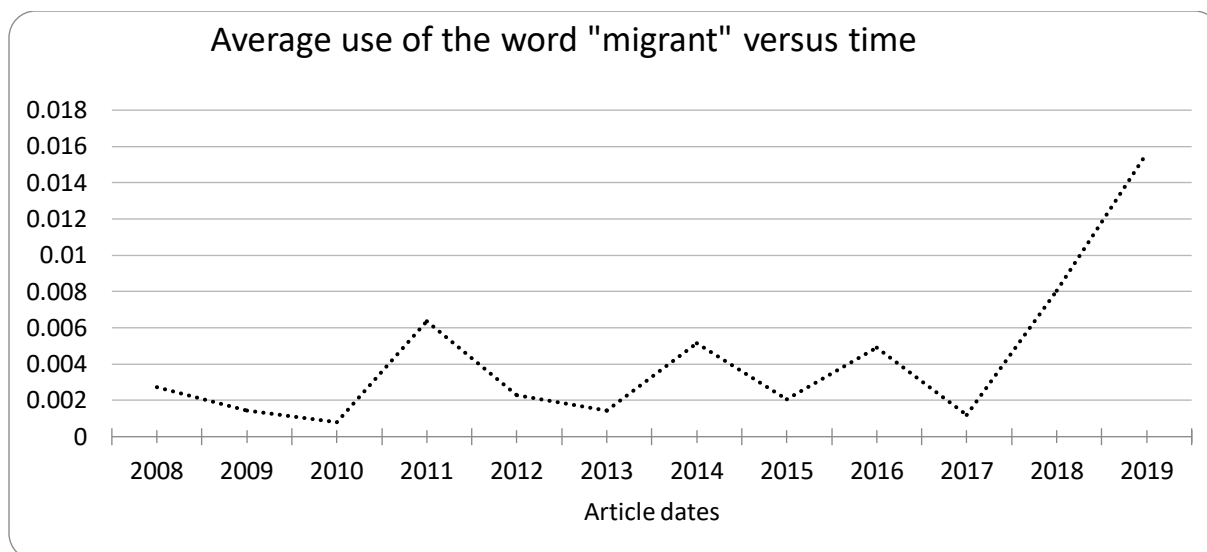
The 2014 and 2017 conservative outliers are due to two just two articles, one by Brietbart and one by The Blaze respectively. The 2014 article by Brietbart focuses mostly on children but are referred to primarily as "illegals." The article by The Blaze is on a case of a woman whose family was accidentally killed in a driving accident by an illegal immigrant. All of these articles carry a strong anti-immigrant sentiment in conjunction to the increased use of the word illegal.



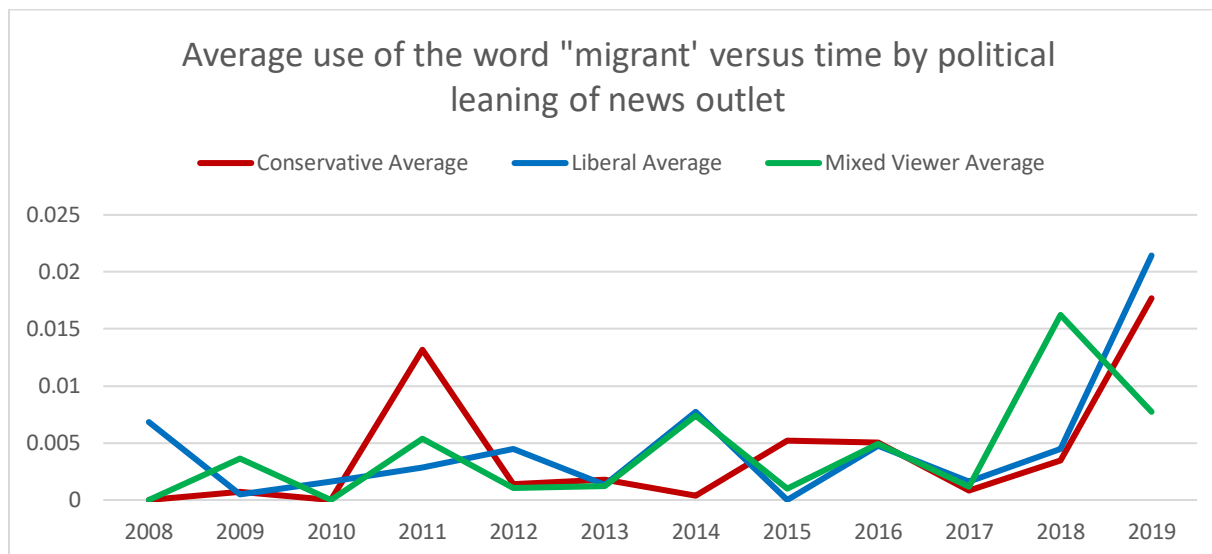
Use of the word *Alien* sees it's biggest use in 2008 and immediately drops to a quarter of that by 2009 and continues to remain low through the rest of the timeline.



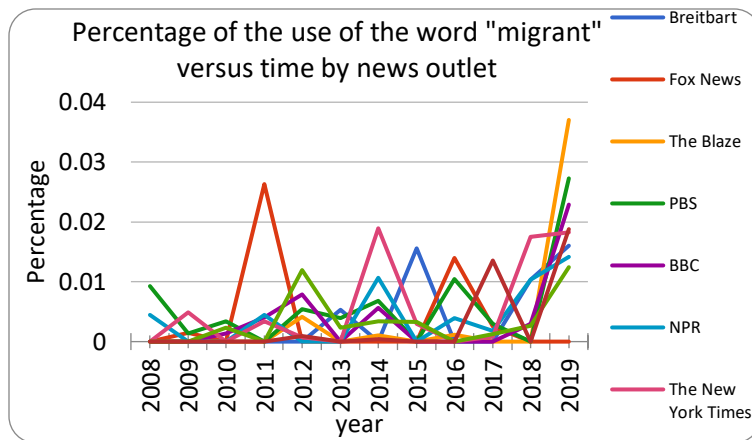
Even in 2008, illegal is only used to any significant degree by Conservatives at a rate nearly three times that of Mixed Viewers. It's use by any source then drops to nothing by 2011 only to be then used sparingly in 2013 by Conservative sources. This trend shows a dropping of use in favor of less politically charged terms. This is part of a larger trend towards more politically correct terminology and shows a greater awareness of the kind of connotation that such words can carry and the desire to diminish their use. However, the word's predominant use by Conservatives is a signal that the word is meant to 'alienate' migrants. It's drastic reduction and continued lack of use since 2009 by even conservatives shows a trend for the dropping of the word entirely when migration is discussed.



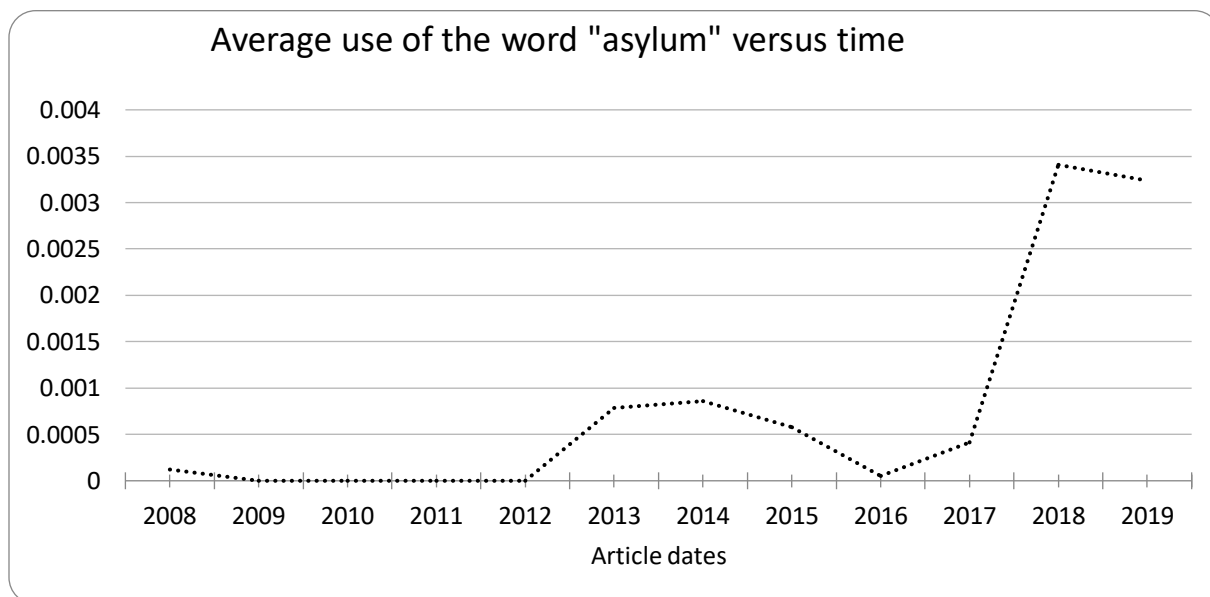
Use of the word *Migrant* is used fairly consistently and at low amounts until 2018 when it doubles and then doubles again in 2019.



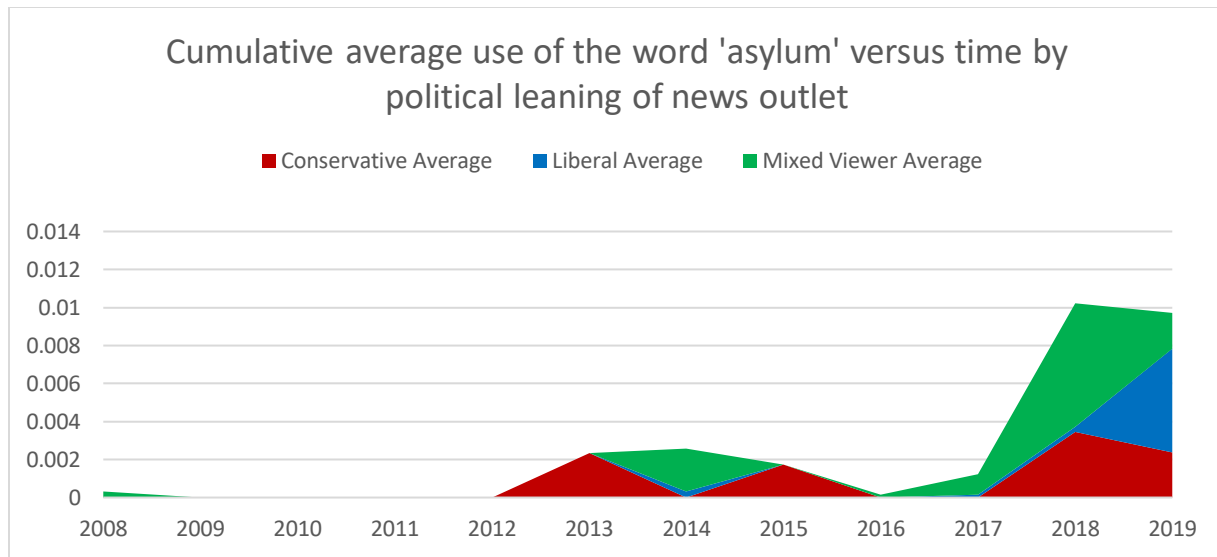
As Migrant is touted as one of the most neutral word possible to describe people who migrate, it is interesting to see where political ideologies line up, and where they separate. From 2013 to 2017, the word was used at nearly the rate by Liberals and Mixed viewers. All three types of sources use the word almost the same frequency in 2016-2017. But then in 2018, it's use by Mixed Viewers triples over the other two types which remain together and then drops a third. While this happens, Conservative and Mixed Viewer remain together, both quadrupling their use of the word Migrant. This increase can show a desire to be more politically neutral on the subject of migration, especially in recent years.



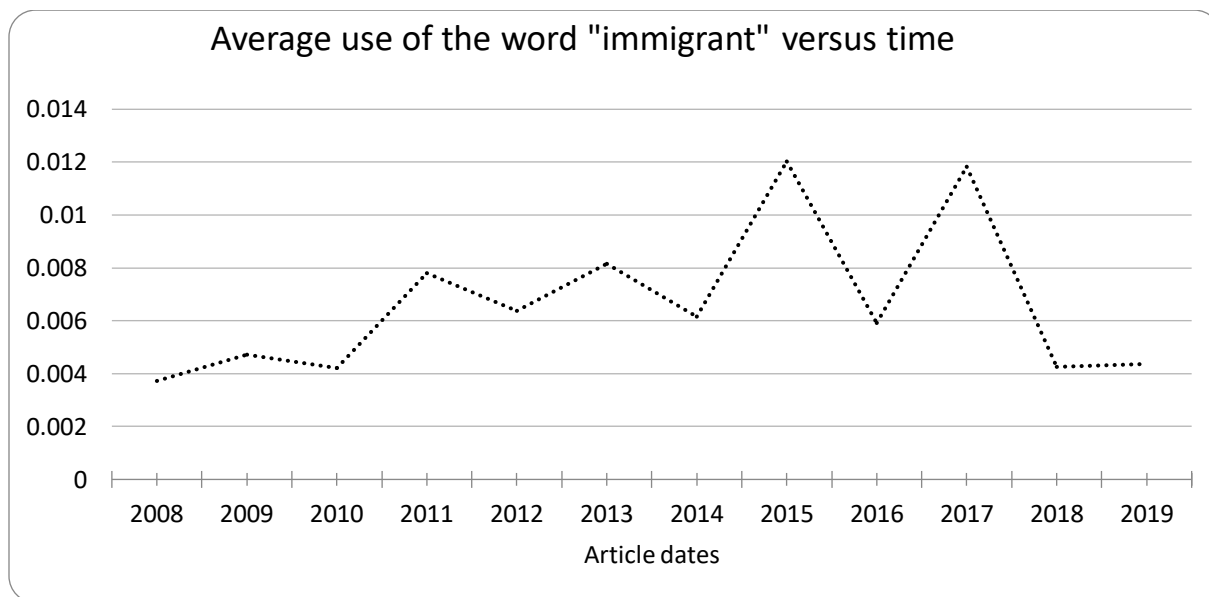
Further breaking down conservative sources in 2011, we can see that this spike in use is due to one outlying article by Fox News in which “migrant” is the only word used to describe ‘migrants’ in the entire article.

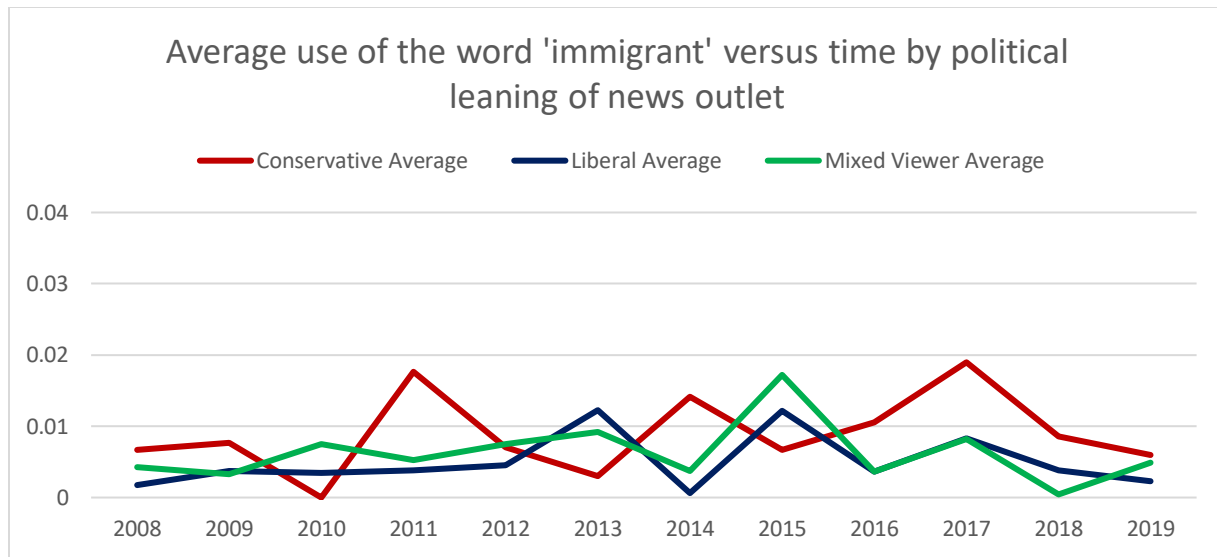


Asylum is very interesting. It's use only briefly appears during 2013-2015, then disappears for two years only to skyrocket in 2018 to 3.5 times its 2014 levels.

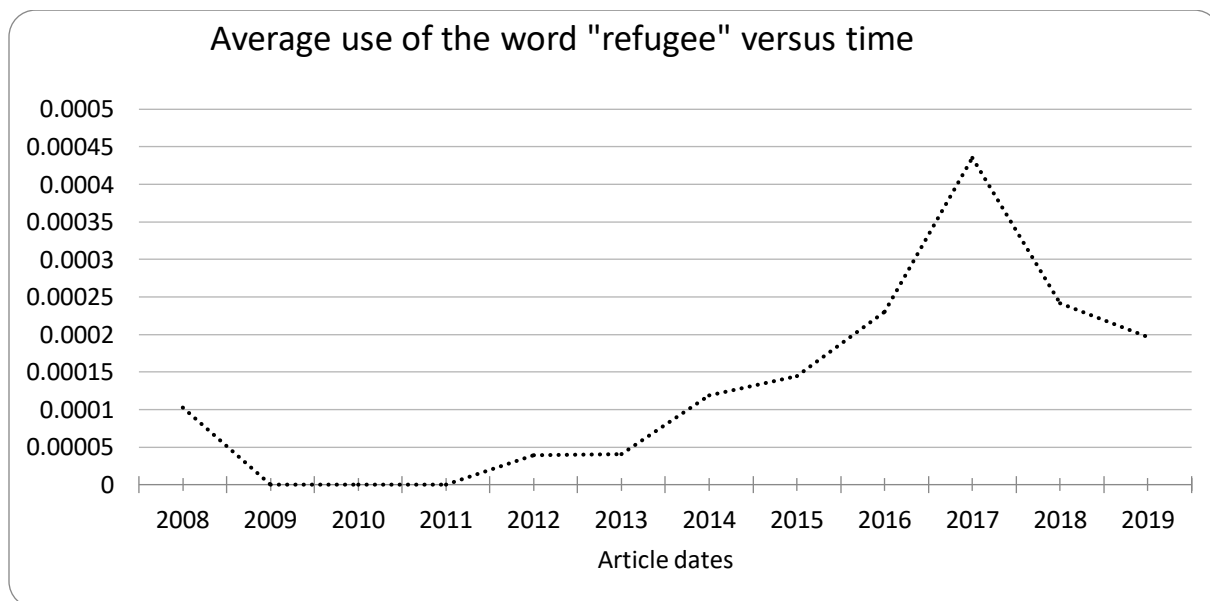


The 2018 spike is due almost completely to Mixed Viewer Sources which all focus heavily on asylum cases in 2018. Liberal sources only start using the term in 2019, meanwhile it's use declines for Mixed Viewers and Conservatives. However, it's use during this time is still more prevalent than at any other time. While the use of the word asylum is on the rise, the strong positive connotation that it carries may mean that will continue to be more favorable by Liberal sources into the near future.

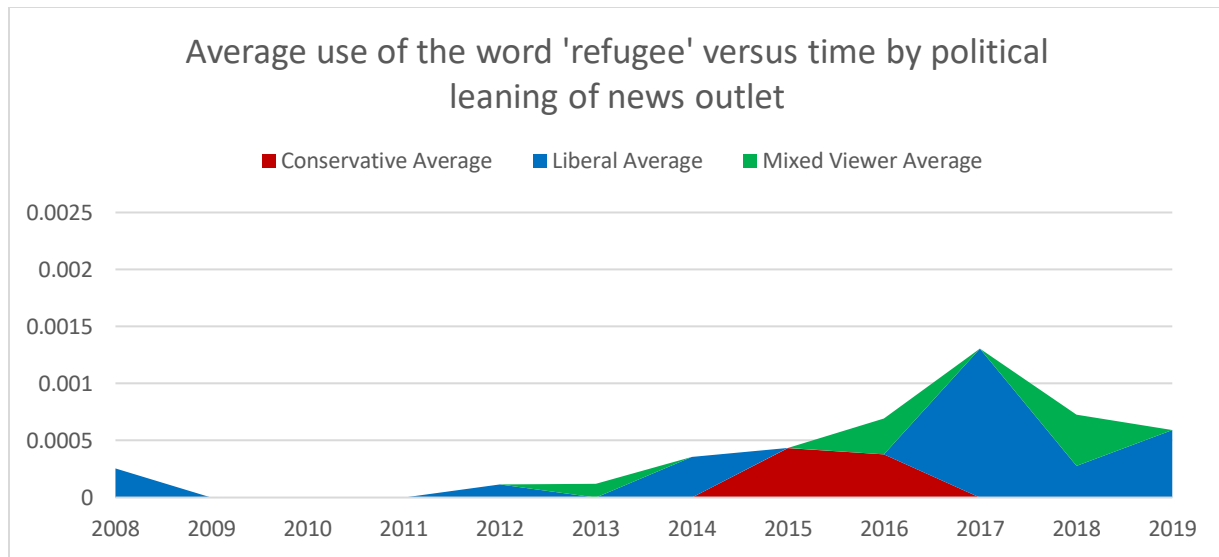




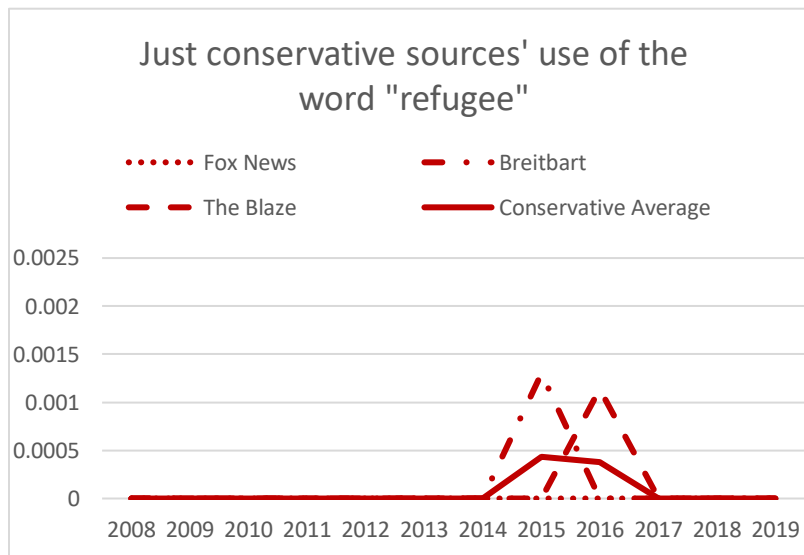
The word *immigrant* has remained consistent between 2008 and 2019. There is a steady increase from 2008 to 2014 with two peaks in 2015 and 2017. 2018 and 2019 see a drop back to 2008 levels. The overall word use in 2015 and 2017 tripled from 2009, but then drops back down to .004 in 2018. There does not appear to be any strong trends or deviation by any political party, likely due to the less strong connotation of the word.



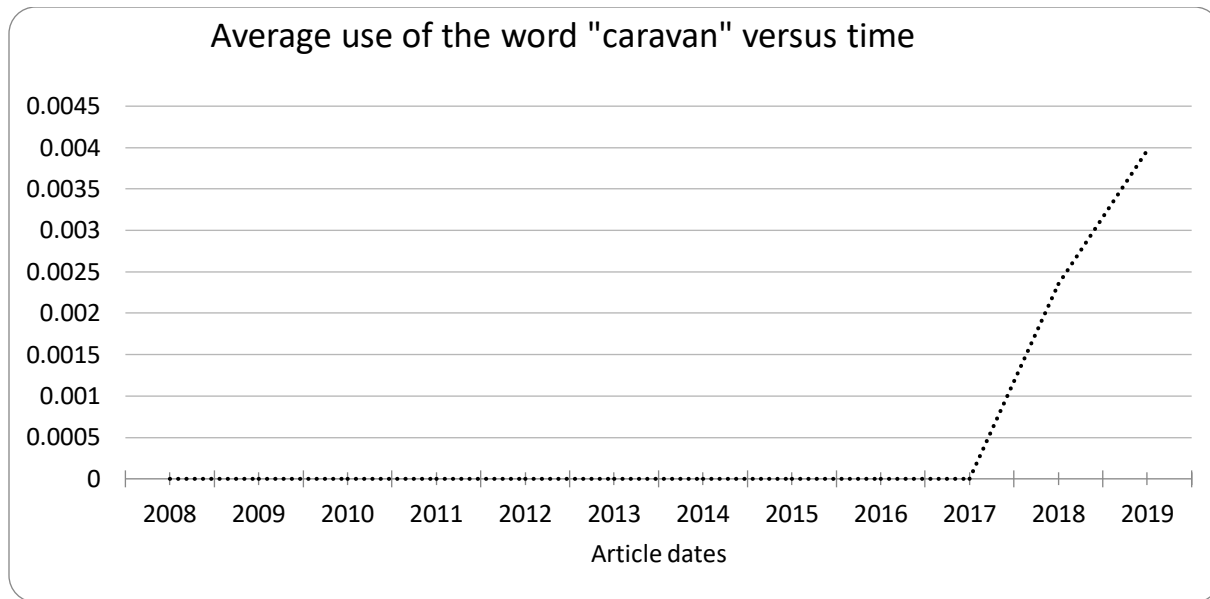
The use of the word *Refugee* shows almost no use from 2009-2013. Afterwards, it's use steadily increases every year to peak in 2017. Now it's use appears to be on the decline. Use by any news outlet of any political leaning studied was nonexistent from 2009-2011.



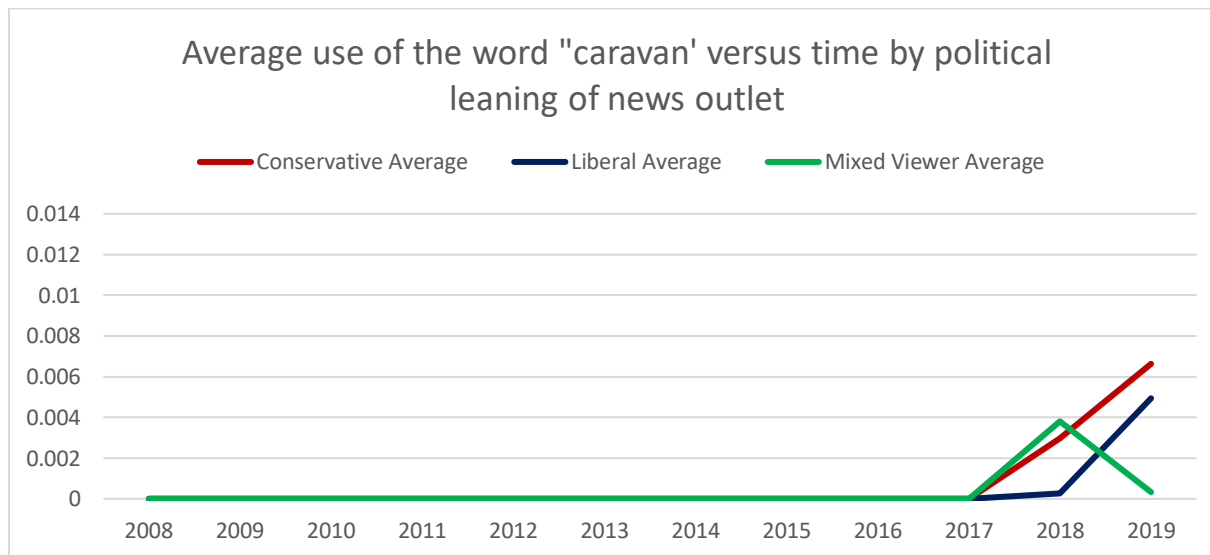
Conservative sources used the word only from 2015-2016. The bulk of the peak in use in 2017 is due exclusively to liberal sources. This could indicate that concerns over 'refugees' hit it's pinnacle in 2017.



Further breaking down the conservative data, we see that the blip of use from 2015-2016 only consists of Breitbart and The Blaze. Fox news, the source that makes up the largest portion of conservative viewers, never uses the word refugee once for any of the articles researched.



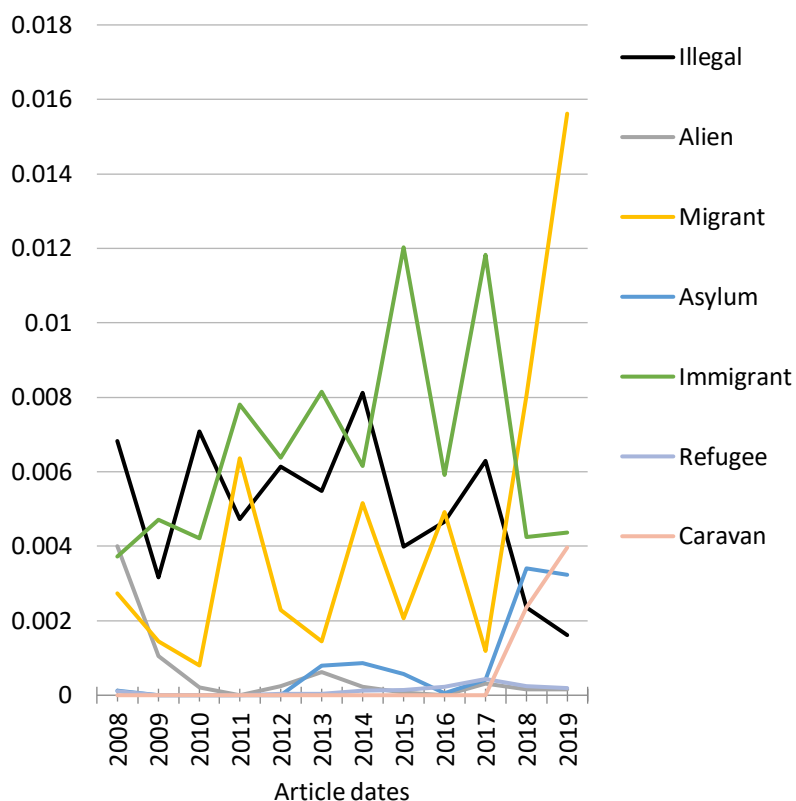
Use of the word *Caravan* only appears in 2018 and has shown a steady increase in use ever since. More data would be needed to tell trends into the future. However, overall use shows no signs of slowing.



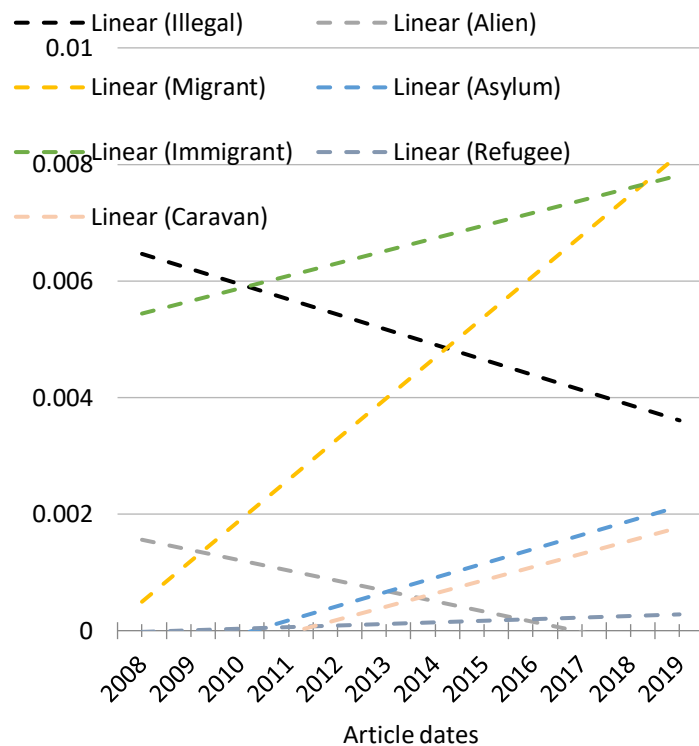
Use continues to rise by Conservative and Liberal sources while Mixed Viewers saw it's biggest use in 2018. Liberal sources only really start to use the word in 2019. The mixed viewer sources were on track with Conservative sources in 2018, but saw a drop almost back to zero in 2019. This trend could be due to the polarizing nature of the term; something that Mixed Viewers might like to avoid in their articles.

Comparative Overall word use:

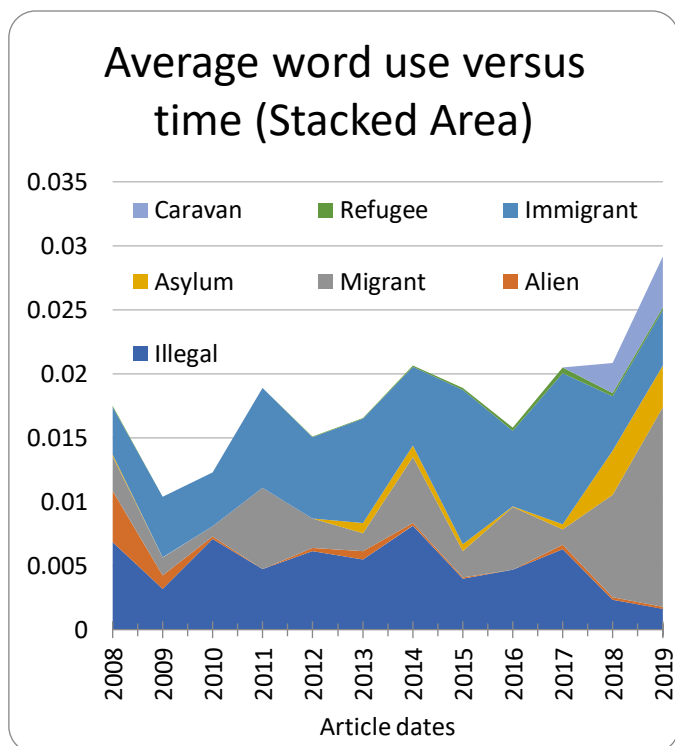
Average word use versus time
(Line)



Average word use versus time (linear trendline)



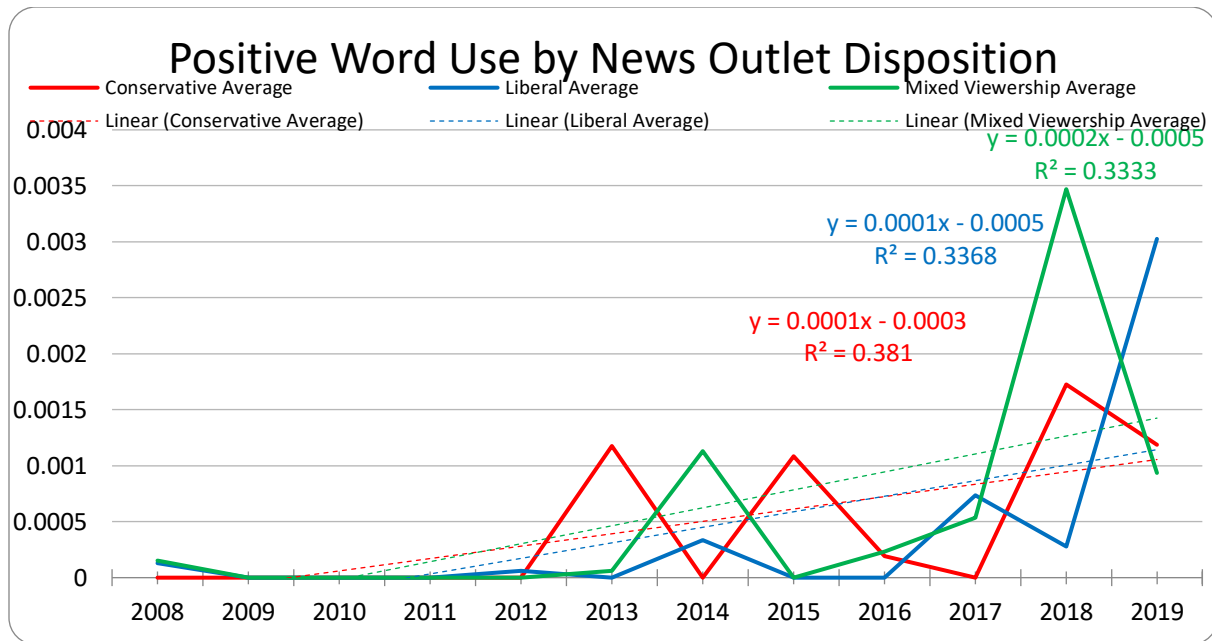
Immigrant, Illegal, and Migrant are the three most common words used when discussing migrants. It is interesting to note that the use of the words Immigrant and Illegal have both been on the decline since 2017 while the use of the words Migrant, Asylum and Caravan have all been on the rise. Migrant has the most notable increase, doubling more than 5 times since 2017. The words Alien, Asylum and Refugee are very marginally used with the exception of Alien which use surpassed even that of the word Migrant before falling into the obscurity. Asylum only begins to be significantly used in 2018 and 2019 where it's use overtakes that of Illegal. Caravan first appears on the radar in 2018 where it's use almost matches that of Asylum and then overtakes it's use in 2019.



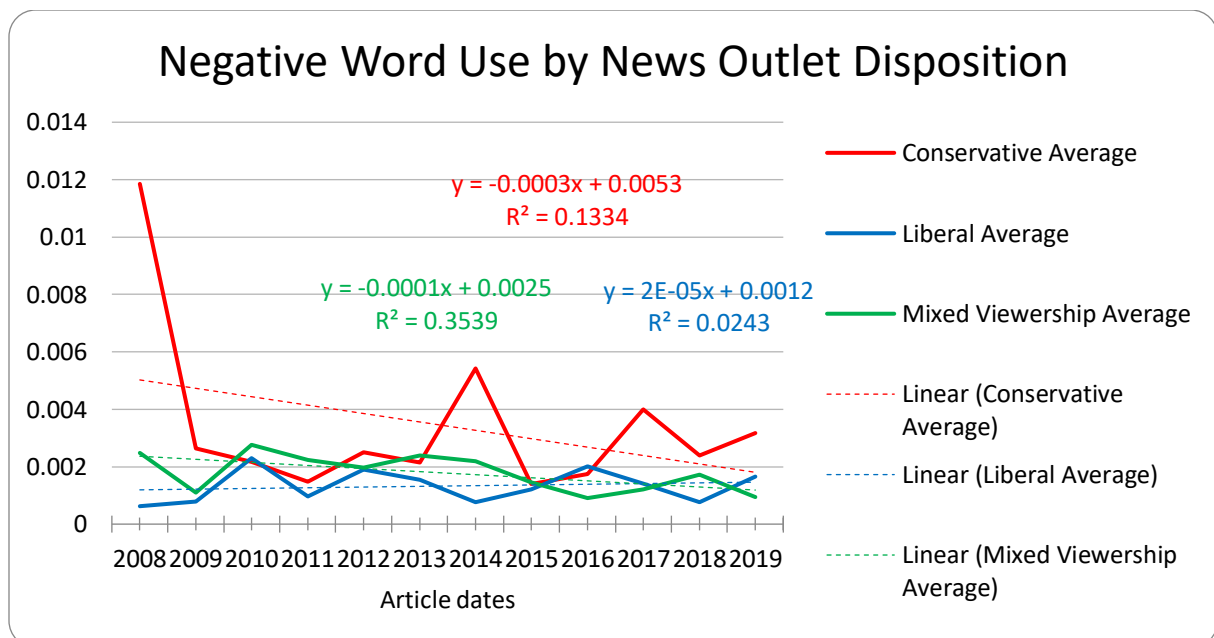
The trendlines of average word use also shows that there is an overall increase in use of the words studied from .01 in 2009 to nearly .03 in 2019. This does not necessarily show an increase in discussion of migrants as the number of articles produced on the subject was not studied. However, this could indicate an increase in focus on migrants themselves instead of other matters related to immigration. This trend could also be the result of other words describing migrants falling out of favor for these words.

Connotation of word use by News Outlet Disposition:

To find more overall connections between the kinds of words used and the political leaning of the news outlet, words were grouped based on their connotation according to a 2013 study. This study looked specifically at the language surrounding certain words (or collocates) used to describe migrants in British newspapers. The finding was that certain positive descriptors are more likely to be located immediately or within five words of the terms “refugee” and “asylum.” (Blinder, 2013) This information was used to group refugee and asylum as positive words. Using this same technique, words assigned a negative connotation include “Illegal,” “Caravan,” and “Alien.” Neutral words include “Migrant” and “Immigrant.” All the words used by each news outlet were grouped into one of the three categories (positive, negative, neutral). These totals were then averaged by the number of collocates in the category. This was done to be able to compare word use without the distribution being thrown off by the use of three words in the neutral category compared to two in the other two categories. This process was repeated for each year for each news outlet. To find the average of each type of connotation (positive, negative and neutral) for each news outlet disposition (Conservative, Liberal and Mixed Viewer) the averages for each news outlet were combined and averaged with the other news outlets of the same political leaning. This gave the average positive, negative and neutral word use for Conservative, Liberals and Mixed Viewer sources.

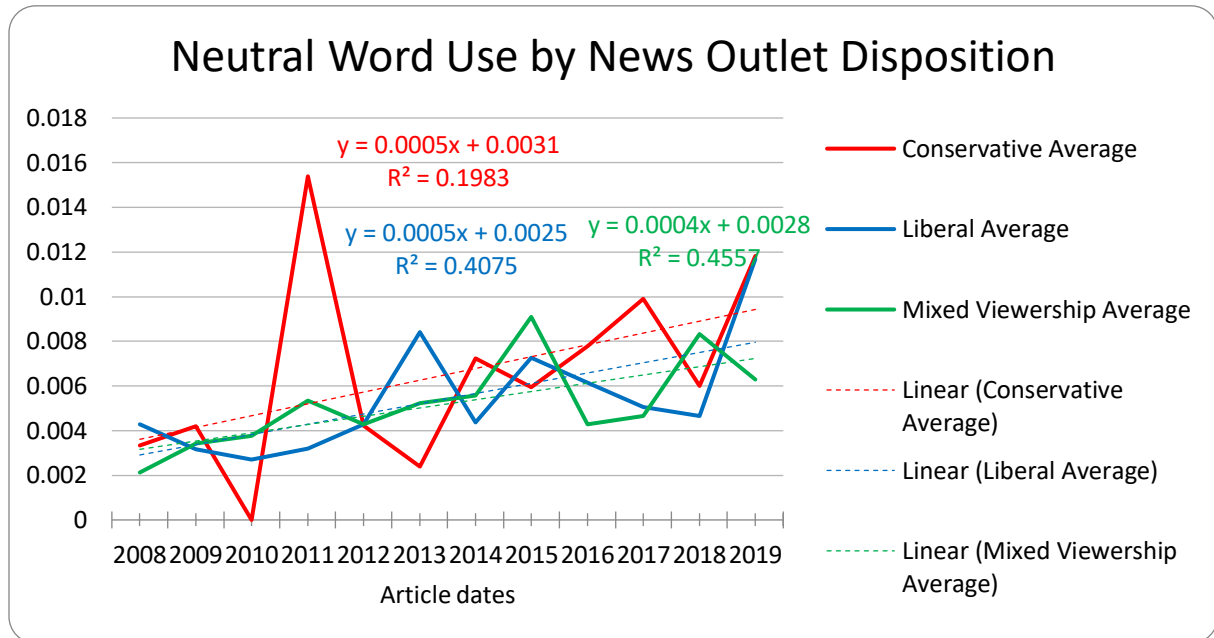


Positive word use by any outlet really only begins in 2013. The use of positive words is increasing across the board, most rapidly by Mixed Viewer sources. Their use of positive words spikes in 2018 to then dip in 2019 and be overtaken by Liberal. Conservative and Liberal use of positive words is increasing at nearly identical rates.

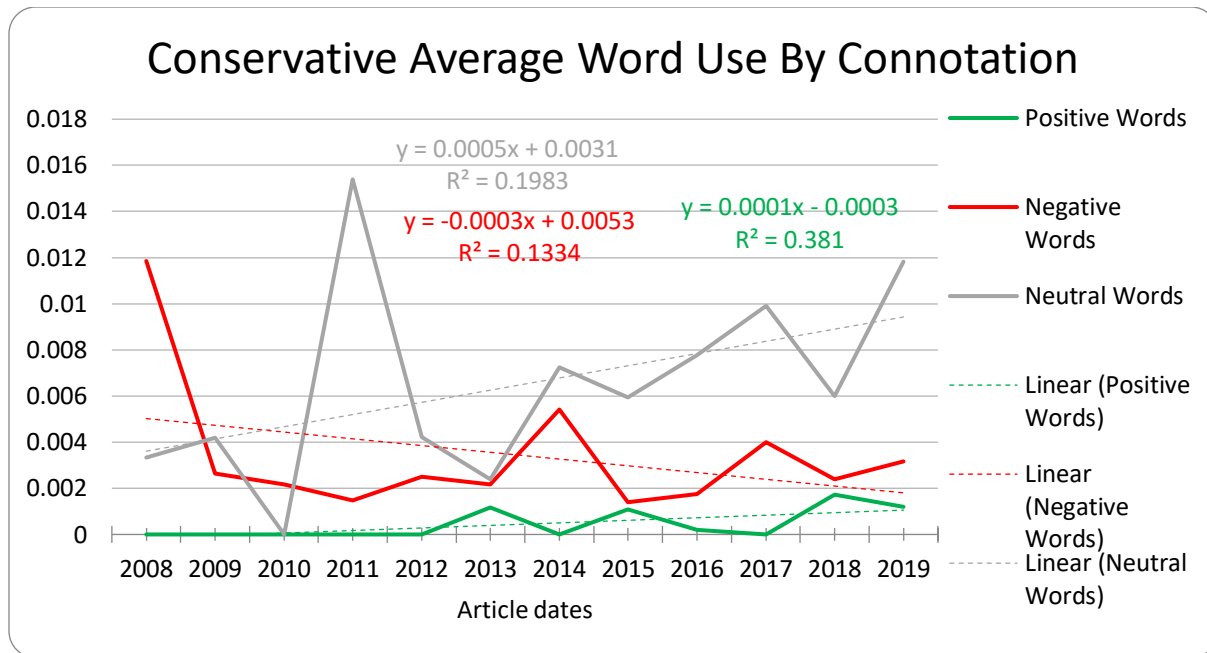


Negative word use by Conservative sources starts very high in 2008 and drops to fall in line with liberal and conservative sources within a year and remains fairly consistent throughout the rest of the study. The 2008 spike by conservatives is due to a Fox News article that exclusively uses the word alien to describe migrants. Conservatives remain consistent except for two smaller spikes in 2014 and 2017 and

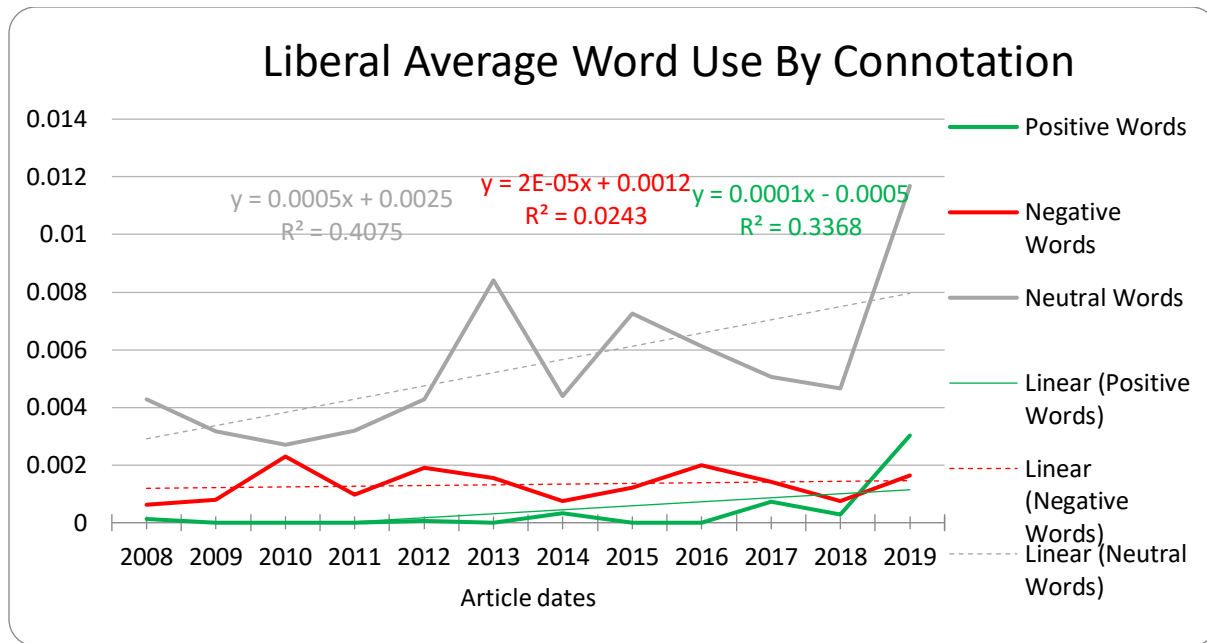
remains slightly above average the two following years. Negative word use is decreasing or remaining steady across the board. However, conservative use has remained slightly above average and could be showing signs of increasing again based on the 2017-2019 numbers.



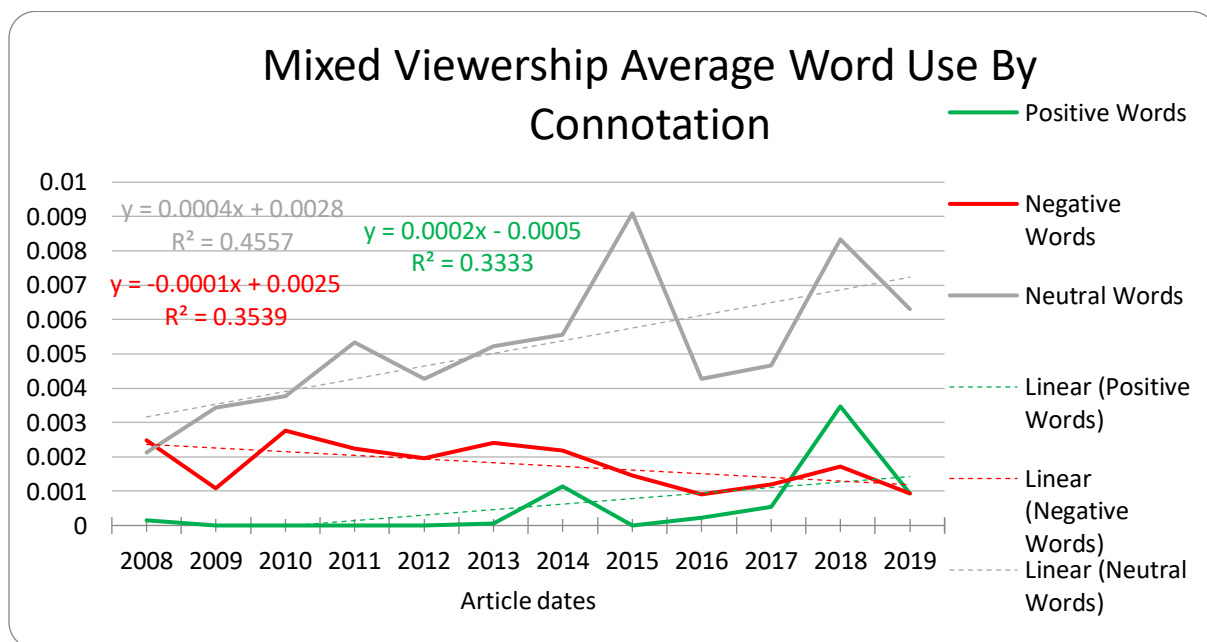
Neutral word use shows an increase at nearly the same rate by all news outlets. All sources end higher in their use of neutral words in 2019 compared to their 2008 levels. Neutral word use by conservatives drops to almost nothing in 2010, then spikes to the highest use in 2011. For the rest of the years studied, the use of neutral words remains equal on average across all news outlets.



Conservatives use more Neutral words than any other but not as consistently as Liberal and Mixed Viewer sources. The largest use of neutral words by Conservatives occurs in 2011 with an unsteady increase from 2013 to 2019. While the use of Positive words remains low, neutral words sees a sudden drop in 2010 and a massive jump 2011. Negative word use sees a jump in 2014 and a spike of negative words in 2008. If it was not for the sharp spike in 2008, negative word use would be remaining steady. However, because of this spike, conservatives have the sharpest decline in the use of negative words among the three media dispositions. The use of neutral words by conservatives is increasing at a rate of .0005 per year. This is consistent with Liberal and Mixed Viewer sources. Positive words are increasing at a rate of .0001 per year and the use of negative words by Conservative outlets are decreasing at a rate of .0003 per year.



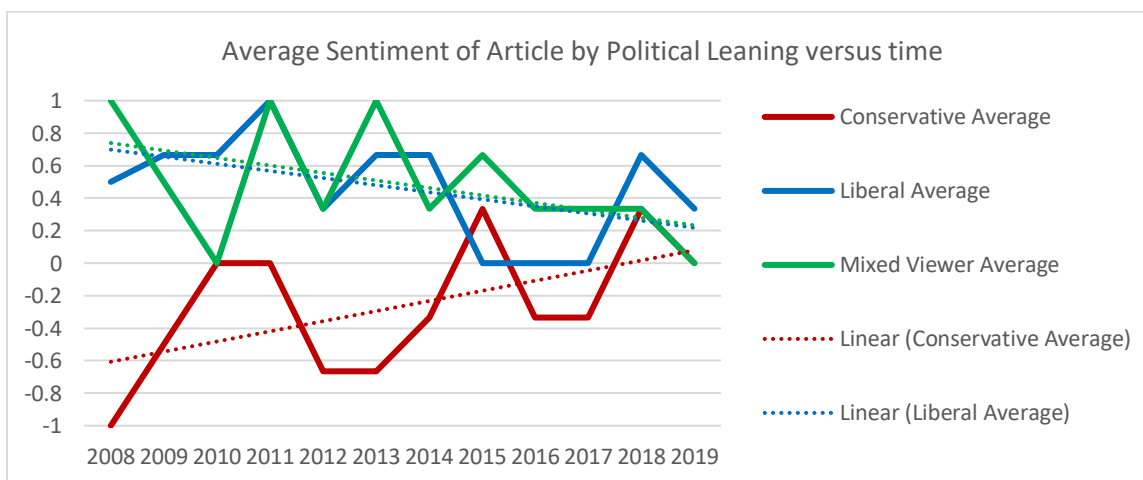
Conservative and Mixed Viewer sources generally use more neutral words than any other. Negative words are used second most commonly with positive words being most infrequently used. This is except for in 2019 when the use of Positive words overtake negative. Neutral word use in 2019 doubles from it's 2018 use. Unlike Conservative sources, 2010 is the only year that Negative word use comes close to Neutral. Liberal sources are increasing their use of neutral words at a rate of .0005 per year. Their use of negative words is remaining steady while positive word use is increasing at an average rate of .0001 per year.



Mixed Viewer share much the same story as Liberal. Neutral word use dwarfs Negative and Positive. The outlier is 2008 when negative and positive word use is essentially the same. Positive word use sees a spike in 2018 where it overtakes negative. There is also a spike of neutral word use in 2015 that isn't seen by Negative or Neutral words. Neutral word use by Mixed Viewer sources are increasing at an average at a rate of .0004 per year. Negative word use is decreasing at a rate of .0001 per year and positive word use is increasing at a rate of .0002 per year.

Positive words use is increasing in use by all types of news outlets at the same rate. Negative word use is decreasing by Conservative at a rate three times that of Mixed Viewers. (-.0003x and -.0001x respectively). This decline is mostly due to the drop in negative word use seen after 2008. Liberal use of negative words remains steady it was already the lowest of the three. Neutral word use is increasing at a rate of .0004 per year on average by all three types of sources. Positive word use is increasing at almost the same rate on average by all three types of news outlets.

Average Sentiment:

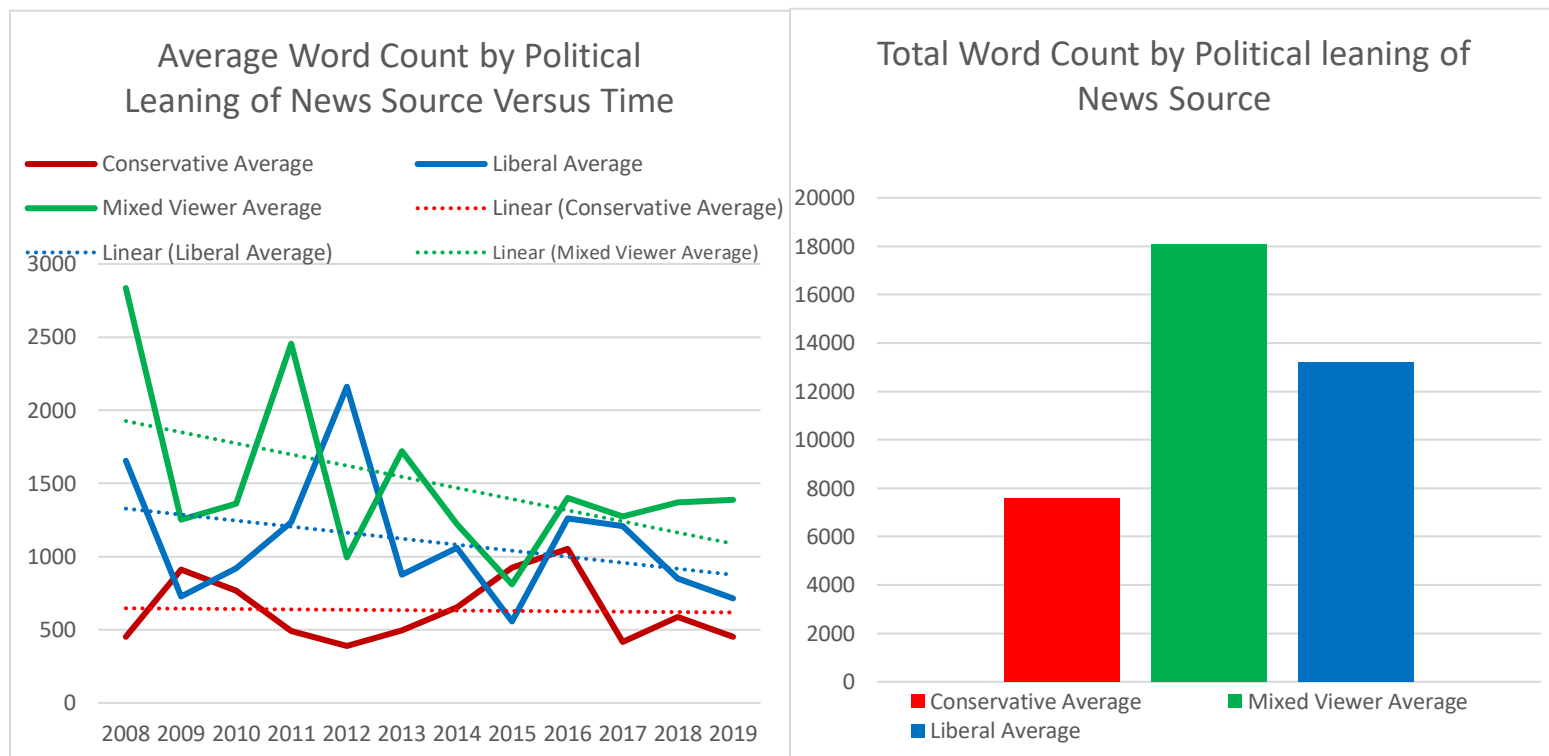


Average sentiments were calculated by giving every article a score based on how migrants were discussed in each article. -1 was given if migrants were discussed with an impersonal or negative tone. 0 was assigned if both positive and negative or a neutral narrative was portrayed. A score of 1 was given if a sympathetic tone was used to discuss migrants. This score was assigned subjectively and independent from the subject of the article. For example, if an article discusses drug cartels posing as migrants but focuses on the impact that this will have on legitimate claims of asylum or the danger it poses to migrants, then a score of 1 will be given. If different article on this same issue portrays migrants as potential threats because of their possibility of being undercover gang members, then the article would get a score of -1. If both sides are portrayed or if a completely objective tone is taken, then the article would get a score of 0. The sentiment score of every article was averaged with all other articles of the same political leaning for that year. The resulting averages are displayed above.

The average trendline of the sentiment of Conservative and Liberal articles is decreasing at precisely the same rate. It starts high near a score of .7 and reduces to .2 by 2019. The average trendline

for Conservatives starts with a score of -.6 but increases towards a more neutral score as time goes on. Based on this data, Liberal, Conservative and Mixed Viewer sources are all converging towards taking a more neutral tone when discussing migrants.

Word Count:



Mixed Viewer sources have the highest overall wordcount of all and is more closely matched by Liberal sources than Conservative with year to year fluctuations. However, like the subjective sentiments, this gap is closing. Articles by Liberal and Mixed viewer sources have both gotten shorter over the years. Lengthy articles overall appear to be on the decline.

Unusual words:

For the most part, the words studied in this thesis are the descriptors used for migrants. However, there are a few notable exceptions:

- In 2016, an article by Fox on Mexican agency helping migrants cross the border describes migrants as “a flood.”
- An article by The Blaze in 2014 promotes the fear that “dangerous individuals” from other countries are using the Mexican border to sneak into the United States. The article also refers to people other than Mexicans as “OTM’s.” This term isn’t seen anywhere else.

- Another article by The Blaze uses the term “Undocumented Workers” and isn’t used again by any article.
- The word Caravan in a 2018 article by PBS is used to refer to the line of cars protesting president Trump’s policy of separating children at the border, rather than the migrants themselves.
- A NPR article in 2008 refers to migrants as “deportees” This term is not seen anywhere else by any other article.
- NPR’s use of the word “Alien” in 2009’s article is only used in reference to the official name of a US Deportation Program.

Interpretation

There was not a clear deviation from the norm of the average use of positive, negative or neutral words by any news outlet. However, when looking at individual words, clear preferences emerge. The use of more politically charged terms like “Alien,” and “Refugee” are affected strongly by the political leaning of the news outlet writing the article. However, when looking at the ratio of connotations themselves, Conservatives have the messiest distribution. This is because Liberal and Mixed Viewership sources have a more consistent breakdown of word use. Neutral words are used most frequently, Negative in the middle and Positive words the most infrequently (aside from a few exceptions). Conservative sources’ distribution on the other hand are much closer together. This means that for many of the years studied, positive, neutral and negative words were used at nearly the same rate. This is not seen by Mixed or Liberal sources. This lack of consistency by Conservative sources in terms of the frequency of the kinds of words used could show less regard for the impact language has. This could indicate that writers and/or readers of Conservative news sources on Mexican Migration have less sensitivity for the impact that a certain descriptor might have. Under this interpretation, a consumer of one of the studied Conservative news articles on Mexican migration might be more apathetic towards the connotation of certain words. Whether the word is Immigrant, Asylum Seeker, or alien, the

reader knows who the author is referring to and sees the language as interchangeable. Or, at least seen as more interchangeable than a Conservative or Mixed Viewer might.

While year to year use fluctuates depending on the individual articles (more data would likely smooth out these undulations), the trend for an increased use of positive and neutral words and general decline in negative word use is observed across the board. So, to say that Conservative sources are blind to the connotation of the words used would be untrue. The general average trend towards neutrality is seen by all outlets. Additionally, strongly negative words like 'alien' that were almost exclusively used by Conservative sources have also fallen out of use. There is a clear trend towards neutrality among all sources, even as the distribution of the connotation of the words used among Conservative sources remain proportionately similar.

While certain polarizing words like 'refugee,' 'caravan,' and 'illegal' show clear preferences for certain political leanings, the general use of positive, negative and neutral words does not clearly favor any political ideology. Across the board, more positive and neutral words are being used to describe migrants, and negative words are on the decline. With the use of neutral words increasing much more rapidly than positive and at nearly the same rate by all sources, this could indicate a universal trend towards greater neutrality when discussing migrants. This is also supported by the results found in the subjective sentiment analysis. This analysis shows all news sources studied from 2008-2019 converging on a neutral tone when discussing migrants.

So what does this mean for the future? Opinions on Mexican migration are converging across the United States. If subjective interpretations of these words remains constant, this could indicate a more objective tone will be taken towards migrants in the near future. As migration rates increase across the world, reporting on the subject will likely follow accordingly.

Decreasing hostility when reporting on the subject can help foster a more welcoming and open attitude towards migrants overall. However, as the tone of hostility and compassion alike are dialed down, this will also mean less sympathy to the cause. Mixed Viewer and Liberal sources that have traditionally been more open to migrants are showing increased apathy. According to a Pew Research study, the percentage of people who believe that Legal immigration should be decreased is on the decline while those that believe it should be increased has been on the rise since 2001. Percentages overlap and converge around 2018. This trend is seen by both by Democrats and Republicans. (Pew, 2018) So while politics may seem more divided and patrician than ever. Reporting on Mexican migration into the united states appears to be heading towards more neutral and less polarizing tones. This gives hope towards a more partisan approach to immigration in the future.

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